A History of Romania: From Medieval Principalities to the Great War

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1. Introduction: The Land and the Peoples

The modern state of Romania is a product of centuries of complex historical developments, born from the convergence of three distinct and often divergent historical regions: Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania. Situated at a crucial crossroads between Central Europe, the Balkans, and the Eurasian steppes, these territories were shaped by a continuous struggle for survival and self-determination against a backdrop of shifting imperial ambitions. The Carpathian Mountains formed a central spine, demarcating these regions both geographically and politically.[1] To the south lay Wallachia, a principality bounded by the Carpathians and the Danube River, while to the east, Moldavia stretched from the mountains to the Dniester River.[2]

In contrast, the region known as Transylvania, a name derived from the Latin for "beyond the forest," was separated by the mountains and had a profoundly different historical trajectory, becoming integrated into the Kingdom of Hungary from the early Middle Ages onward.[3]

The early medieval history of these lands was not characterized by the formation of a single, dominant political entity. Instead, it was a "porous frontier" defined by geopolitical instability.[5] Repeated invasions by migratory peoples, including the Scythians, Goths, Huns, Avars, and Mongols, created an environment where permanent, large-scale settlements were dangerous, particularly in the flatlands of Wallachia and Moldavia.[1] This constant threat meant that the economy remained largely decentralized, based on small-scale agriculture and animal husbandry, with inhabitants often prepared to flee at a moment's notice.[5] This fluid, decentralized structure explains why the Romanian principalities emerged relatively late in the 14th century, long after many of their European counterparts. Their genesis was less about a clear-cut act of founding and more about the gradual consolidation of smaller, defensive alliances into larger polities once the Mongol Golden Horde's influence began to wane.[2] The divergent paths of Wallachia and Moldavia, which developed as independent entities, and Transylvania, which was gradually incorporated into the structured feudal system of the Hungarian Kingdom, would define the course of Romanian history for centuries, setting the stage for a long and arduous path toward unification.

2. The Genesis of the Principalities: Wallachia and Moldavia in the Middle Ages

The modern history of Romania is rooted in the formation of the medieval principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, a process that unfolded in the 14th century following the decline of Mongol power. For nearly a century, from the mid-13th to mid-14th centuries, the steppes between the Dnieper and Danube rivers were under the influence of the Golden Horde, a constant threat that prevented the consolidation of local political power.[7] The emergence of Wallachia in the early 14th century was a direct result of this shifting geopolitical landscape. The principality was founded by Basarab I, who led a successful rebellion against Charles I of Hungary.[8] The decisive moment of this struggle came in 1330 with Basarab's victory in the Battle of Posada, an event that is considered the foundational moment of Wallachian independence.[7]

Similarly, the Principality of Moldavia emerged slightly later, in the 1350s, amidst a power vacuum created by the decline of the Golden Horde and a concurrent Hungarian military campaign.[2] Its establishment is attributed to the nobleman Dragoş of Bedeu and later solidified by Bogdan I, who revolted against Hungarian rule.[1] The rivalry between the Polish

and Hungarian kingdoms for influence over Moldavia provided a brief window of opportunity for its rulers to strengthen their position.[2] However, this period of independence was short-lived. The rising power of the Ottoman Empire to the south presented a new, formidable challenge that the principalities could not overcome through military means alone.

Facing constant Ottoman pressure, the principalities adopted a pragmatic strategy of survival through submission. In 1417, Wallachia accepted Ottoman suzerainty, followed by Moldavia in 1538.[1] This tributary status was not a simple military defeat but a complex political choice. Unlike other regions such as the Banat or Dobruja, which were fully absorbed into the Ottoman administrative structure, Wallachia and Moldavia were allowed to retain their internal autonomy and Christian identity.[5] They were governed by local Christian rulers, or

voivodes, and Turks were legally prohibited from owning land or building religious establishments within their territories.[1] This "loose feudal dependence" allowed the principalities to preserve their distinct identity and institutional framework for centuries, a strategic balancing act that would define their relationship with the Ottoman Empire until the 19th century.[13]

3. The Struggle for Autonomy: Princes, Battles, and Diplomacy

The period following the establishment of the principalities was defined by a heroic and often brutal struggle to maintain autonomy against the ever-encroaching Ottoman Empire. This era produced a number of legendary figures whose military prowess and political cunning would be immortalized in national memory. Among the most celebrated were Mircea the Old of Wallachia and Stephen the Great of Moldavia. Both monarchs, despite their countries' formal vassalage, conducted a series of successful military operations against the Turks in the late 14th and 15th centuries, a feat that helped distract the Ottomans from their broader strategic goals in the Mediterranean and the Balkans.[7]

No figure from this period is more globally recognized or historically debated than Vlad III, also known as Vlad the Impaler. His legend is a complex tapestry woven from historical fact, contemporary propaganda, and later nationalistic myth-making. As a child, Vlad and his younger brother were political hostages at the Ottoman court, an experience that profoundly shaped his life and outlook.[15] His brutal methods, most notably impalement, were employed not merely as acts of cruelty but as a calculated tool to consolidate power by purging the Wallachian boyars who had betrayed his family and to deter both internal rivals and external enemies.[17] The most famous example of this tactic was the "Forest of the Impaled" in 1462, a

sight so gruesome that it reportedly demoralized the forces of Sultan Mehmed II and forced their retreat.[17] It is worth noting that Vlad's reputation for cruelty was amplified by the new printing press technology in Germany, which churned out luridly illustrated accounts of his exploits, making him an early subject of mass media sensationalism.[17] Centuries later, Romanian historians would re-contextualize this brutality, viewing it as a necessary evil to strengthen the central government and resist foreign domination, a testament to how nationalistic narratives can reshape historical memory.[17] The enduring link to Bram Stoker's fictional character, Dracula, is a far more recent phenomenon, a literary invention of the late 19th century that was popularized by 20th-century historians and has little basis in the historical figure's life beyond the shared name and a vaguely gothic setting.[16]

The struggle for a pan-Romanian identity found a symbolic, though fleeting, expression in the actions of Michael the Brave. As the Voivode of Wallachia in the late 16th century, he joined an anti-Ottoman alliance and, for a brief period between 1599 and 1600, succeeded in conquering and ruling all three Romanian principalities—Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania.[2] Although his political project was short-lived and born of the opportunistic politics of the "Long Turkish War," it was later viewed by Romanian historiography as a powerful precursor to the later national unification movements.[2]

4. Social and Economic Life in the Danubian Principalities

The social and economic landscape of Moldavia and Wallachia was fundamentally shaped by their unique geopolitical position. Unlike the more rigid feudal systems of Western Europe, the Danubian principalities featured a distinct social hierarchy and a precarious economy. The central figure of political power was the *Hospodar* or Prince, who was considered the supreme ruler of the land. His authority, however, was in constant tension with the power of the *boyars*, the local nobility who held vast political and economic influence.[21] Until the Phanariote era, the boyars even had the right to elect the ruler, a power that they often used to install candidates sympathetic to their interests, leading to chronic political instability and short, contested reigns.[21]

The economic foundation of the boyar class was land ownership, a privilege they often acquired through the "danii" or "donations" system, where the Prince would grant villages to his military servants.[6] This system, coupled with the absence of primogeniture and the frequent redistribution of land by the Prince, created a dynamic where the boyar's power was contingent on his loyalty to the ruler, not on a permanent, inherited territorial claim.[5] By the 18th century, the boyars had amassed control over more than half of the land in the

principalities. This land ownership came with the right to collect rents from the peasantry, who, in addition to paying a land rent to the Hospodar, were obligated to give the boyar a portion of their produce (

dijmă) and a number of days of unpaid labor (*clacă* or *robotă*).[6] As the feudal era progressed, free peasants were increasingly forced into serfdom due to factors like hunger, invasions, and high taxes, a process that accelerated the concentration of land in the hands of the boyar elite.[6]

The urban economy of the principalities was primarily based on trade, with towns like Brăila and Bucharest acting as crucial middlemen between the Levant, Central Europe, and the Black Sea.[22] The economy was focused on the export of raw materials such as cereals, salt, livestock, and honey, while more refined goods like fine cloth and tools were largely imported.[22] Local crafts were considered a secondary activity. This trade was a cosmopolitan affair, with numerous foreign merchants from Transylvania, Ragusa, and Poland participating, often enjoying special privileges like reduced customs duties.[22] The instability of the political climate, marked by constant competition for the throne and frequent foreign interventions, had a negative impact on this urban economy, making it a fragile enterprise.[22]

An unfortunate and enduring aspect of the social life in Moldavia and Wallachia was the institution of slavery. This practice, which lasted for five centuries until its abolition in the mid-19th century, was uniquely applied to the Roma population.[6] Roma who arrived in the region were forced into bondage and were owned by the Prince ("slaves of the State"), monasteries, and private individuals.[24] Owners had unlimited rights over their slaves, short of killing them, and the selling and buying of entire families were common practices.[24] Historical debate exists on the origins of this system, with some scholars suggesting it was adopted from the Tatars, who commonly enslaved prisoners of war.[24] Regardless of its origin, the brutal institution remained a dark stain on the social fabric of the principalities for half a millennium, a reality that sharply contrasted with the lavish lives of the boyar elite, as noted by foreign visitors.[21]

5. Transylvania: A Separate Path

While Wallachia and Moldavia were struggling to define their autonomy against the Ottoman tide, Transylvania followed a separate and complex historical trajectory. From the 10th to the 12th century, the region was gradually incorporated into the Kingdom of Hungary.[4] This integration formalized a multi-ethnic society, but one that was legally and politically stratified. The pivotal moment that enshrined this social order was the codification of the

Unio Trium Nationum (Union of the Three Nations) in 1437.[25] This pact was an agreement of mutual aid among the three dominant estates—the Hungarian nobility, the Saxon patrician class, and the free military Székelys—primarily in response to a peasant revolt.[4] The pact's most significant consequence was the institutionalized exclusion of the majority Romanian population from political rights and public life, a reality that persisted because they were overwhelmingly Orthodox Christian and peasant.[13]

Following the Battle of Mohács in 1526, Transylvania's relationship with Hungary changed dramatically. It became a semi-independent principality, functioning as a vassal state to the Ottoman Empire while simultaneously under a degree of Habsburg suzerainty.[3] This dual dependence continued for over a century until the Habsburg monarchy gained full control after the defeat of the Ottomans at the end of the 17th century.[3] While the Habsburg takeover came with its own set of challenges, it paradoxically created an opportunity for the marginalized Romanians. The Habsburgs, as a rival imperial power, were not bound by the old internal arrangements of the

Unio Trium Nationum. In an effort to consolidate their authority and create a counter-balance to the Protestant Hungarian and Saxon elites, they supported the formation of the Uniate Church, a Greek-Catholic rite that accepted the authority of the Pope.[27]

This religious union, while controversial, served as a powerful vehicle for national revival. Although the promised political and economic rights for Romanian clerics were slow to materialize, the union fostered a new, public-spirited intellectual elite.[27] This group of scholars and clergy, known as the "Transylvanian School," was the first to use the ideas of the European Enlightenment to advocate for Romanian rights.[29] Its leaders, including Ion Budai-Deleanu, Samuil Micu-Klein, and Gheorghe Șincai, were central to this endeavor.[29] Their work was monumental, providing historical and philological arguments in favor of the thesis of Daco-Roman continuity—the idea that Transylvanian Romanians were the direct descendants of Roman colonists in ancient Dacia.[29] The school's efforts led to the documentation of the Romanian language and the creation of its first grammar, laying the intellectual foundation for a modern national consciousness.[29] The Habsburg takeover, therefore, inadvertently provided the conditions for the development of a nationalist ideology that would, in time, seek the unification of all Romanians.

6. The Phanariote Era: Imperial Control and Cultural Influence

In the 18th century, the political landscape of Wallachia and Moldavia underwent a dramatic

transformation with the beginning of the Phanariote era. This period marked a significant shift in Ottoman policy, moving away from the tradition of appointing native princes to governing the principalities through a new Greek-speaking elite from the Phanar quarter of Constantinople.[33] This change was a direct response to the perceived disloyalty of the native princes, most notably the Moldavian Prince Dimitrie Cantemir, who allied with Russia during a war with the Ottomans in 1711.[12] The Ottomans saw the Phanariots—a class of wealthy, educated, and loyal Christian merchants and officials—as a more reliable alternative for administering their Danubian tax farms.[33]

For the native population, the Phanariote regime was primarily characterized by intense economic exploitation. The new princes, or *Hospodars*, often purchased their thrones and were subjected to short reigns, which led them to treat the principalities as a "tenancy" to be exploited for personal enrichment.[12] They imposed "excessive fiscal policies" to meet the tributary demands of the Sublime Porte and fund their lavish lifestyles. The national budget of the principalities was siphoned off, with a large portion going directly to the ruling family and to the Ottoman treasury.[37] The existing boyar class, already in the process of seizing property from free peasants, continued this process with accelerated pace during this period.[21]

Despite the economic hardship, the Phanariote era was a paradox. It was an oppressive system that inadvertently introduced the very forces that would later dismantle it. The Phanariot princes, through their deep connections with the Orthodox Patriarchate and their familiarity with Western European and Russian institutions, introduced new administrative and legal practices to the principalities.[33] They copied modern institutions, and their cultural life was a blend of Byzantine tradition and Western influence, creating a "Byzantium after Byzantium" that extended across the Black Sea into Central Europe.[35] This Hellenic influence and exposure to foreign ideas, however, was a double-edged sword. It contributed to the rise of a new, educated elite—including some native boyars—who, armed with a newfound awareness of modern political thought, began to question the legitimacy of the Phanariote system.[38] This intellectual ferment culminated in the Wallachian Uprising of 1821, a social and political rebellion led by Tudor Vladimirescu that, while initially a movement against the Phanariote administration, espoused an early form of Romanian nationalism.[12] The uprising, though ultimately suppressed by Ottoman forces, had a decisive effect: the Ottomans recognized its anti-Phanariote message and agreed to abolish the system, returning to the practice of appointing native princes.[12] The Phanariote era, therefore, concluded by inadvertently providing the intellectual and political conditions for its own undoing and for the national awakening that would follow.

7. National Awakening and the Path to Modernity

The 19th century was a period of intense intellectual and political ferment in the Romanian lands. Fueled by the legacy of the "Transylvanian School" and a growing sense of national identity, a series of movements and events laid the groundwork for the creation of a modern Romanian state. A key event in this narrative was the Wallachian Revolution of 1848, a liberal and nationalist uprising that was part of the wider wave of European revolutions that year.[39] Led by a group of young intellectuals and officers, the revolution sought to overturn the Russian-imposed

Regulamentul Organic regime and abolish boyar privileges.[39]

The movement's core principles were articulated in the *Proclamation of Islaz*, a constitutional-level document that called for national independence, civil rights, universal taxation, freedom of the press, and the election of a responsible prince for a fixed term.[39] While the revolutionaries harbored a broader vision of a unified "Daco-Romanian Kingdom," their immediate focus remained on internal reforms and the creation of a "Wallachian, not Romanian" nation.[42] The revolution, despite initial popular support and rapid gains, was marked by internal conflicts and ultimately failed due to a coordinated intervention by the Russian and Ottoman armies, who saw the movement as a threat to their established order.[39]

While the nationalist movements in the principalities were focused on independence and union, the Romanian populations in Transylvania, Bukovina, and Bessarabia were pursuing different goals: autonomy and cultural preservation.[45] These disparate regional aspirations were ultimately united by the intellectual foundation provided by the "Transylvanian School." This cultural movement, led by a Greek-Catholic intellectual elite in the Habsburg Empire, had systematically documented the Latin origins of the Romanian people, a theory that provided the foundational ideological basis for unification.[29] The historical discourse they created was a shared ideological framework that all Romanian nationalists could rally around, regardless of their location.[29]

The opportunity for union came unexpectedly with the Crimean War (1853-1856), which ended the Russian protectorate over Moldavia and Wallachia.[46] The 1856 Treaty of Paris placed the principalities under the collective guarantee of the Great Powers and stipulated that the local populations could vote on their future organization.[47] The assemblies convened for this purpose, known as the

ad-hoc divans, overwhelmingly voted for unification and foreign rule, but the Great Powers, rejecting these "fundamental wishes," agreed only to a minimal formal union.[48] This diplomatic ambiguity created the perfect opening for a political masterstroke. In 1859, the Moldo-Wallachian elites, relying on the legitimacy of the assemblies' wishes, proceeded with a "fait accompli".[48] They elected the same person, Alexandru Ioan Cuza, as prince of both Moldavia and Wallachia, a bold act of defiance that circumvented the objections of the Great Powers and created the basis for the modern Romanian state.[49]

8. The United Principalities and the Kingdom of Romania

The dual election of Alexandru Ioan Cuza in 1859 initiated a period of rapid and transformative change. As the first ruler of the United Principalities, Cuza is remembered as a "primary founder of modern Romania" for his efforts to centralize the state and implement a series of radical liberal reforms.[52] The most significant of these was the secularization of monastic estates in 1863, a move that transferred vast lands—nearly a quarter of the country's territory—to state ownership. This reform was aimed at reducing the immense wealth and political influence of the monasteries, many of which were dedicated to foreign religious establishments.[53] This act was followed in 1864 by a comprehensive agrarian law that emancipated peasants from their feudal obligations and gave them ownership of the land they worked, with landlords retaining one-third of their estates.[53]

While these reforms were progressive in intent and part of a broader European trend of state-building, they were also top-down, centralizing projects that contained a fundamental paradox. Cuza used the newly consolidated power of the state to abolish the very institutions—the Church and the nobility—that had historically limited the power of the central government.[56] While this approach was effective in achieving a rapid modernization of the country's legal and social framework, it failed to fully address the deep-seated social issues it was meant to solve. The agrarian law, for instance, had questionable social results. It left a significant portion of the peasantry in a precarious position, dependent on a subsistence-based existence and vulnerable to the vagaries of the international grain market.[27] The "unresolved agrarian question" would persist for decades, culminating in a major armed peasant rebellion in 1907.[57]

The United Principalities, officially named Romania in 1866, still lacked full sovereignty and remained a vassal of the Ottoman Empire.[49] Cuza's reign was brought to an end by a coup in 1866, and he was replaced by a foreign prince, Karl of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, a strategic move to gain greater international legitimacy and acceptance from the Great Powers.[49] The country's full independence was finally achieved following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, in which Romania fought alongside its Russian ally.[49] The 1878 Treaty of Berlin formally recognized Romania as an independent state.[58] The path to independence, however, came at a price: despite its military contribution, Romania was compelled to cede the district of Southern Bessarabia to Russia in exchange for the region of Northern Dobruja.[49] This betrayal, where an ally seized territory from a country it had just fought alongside, would have a lasting impact on Romanian foreign policy.[45] Three years later, in 1881, the country's status

was elevated from a principality to a kingdom, and Prince Carol was crowned King Carol I.[49]

9. The Road to the Great War

After achieving independence and becoming a kingdom, Romanian nationalism shifted its focus from internal consolidation to the grand, irredentist goal of uniting all ethnic Romanians into a single state.[45] This national ambition was primarily directed at the incorporation of Transylvania, a region with a Romanian majority that remained under the control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.[45] The loss of Southern Bessarabia to Russia in 1878 had instilled a profound sense of diplomatic mistrust in the Romanian political elite. This, along with the threat of being "squashed between two large empires," initially led Romania to align itself with Austria-Hungary.[45]

However, the outbreak of World War I in 1914 presented a new set of strategic calculations. Romania initially declared its neutrality, observing the conflict from the sidelines.[59] By 1916, influenced by the Allied victories at Verdun and on the Somme, and lured by the promise of territorial gains, Romania made a high-stakes gamble and entered the war on the Allied side.[59] The primary motivation was to seize the opportunity to achieve its long-held dream of uniting with Transylvania.[59] The military strategy, as outlined by the Allies, called for an offensive against Austria-Hungary while holding a defensive line against Bulgaria, but Romania, driven by its irredentist ambitions, chose the opposite path, launching a full-scale invasion of Transylvania.[61]

The initial campaign was met with some success as Romanian forces crossed the Carpathians and advanced into Transylvania.[59] The victory was short-lived, however, as the Central Powers mounted a swift and devastating counter-offensive. The Romanian army suffered a series of catastrophic defeats, attributed by military historians to political interference, widespread incompetence within the military leadership, and a severe lack of modern equipment.[59] The country was quickly overrun, forcing the government and military to retreat to Moldavia, where they sought refuge behind the defensive lines of the Sereth River and relied on Russian support.[59] The situation was rendered even more dire by the Russian Revolution of 1917. With Russia's withdrawal from the war, Romania was left isolated and surrounded by Central Powers armies.[59] This led to a forced surrender and the signing of the punitive Treaty of Bucharest in 1918, which stripped Romania of territory and placed its economy under Austro-German control.[63]

The Treaty of Bucharest was a catastrophic consequence of a failed campaign. It appeared to crush Romania’s national ambitions and undermine its sovereignty by allowing German civil

servants to veto decisions and placing its resources under the control of the Central Powers.[64] However, the tide of the war was turning. The collapse of the Central Powers rendered the treaty moot. In a final, brilliantly timed diplomatic maneuver, Romania unilaterally abrogated the Treaty of Bucharest and re-entered the war on November 10, 1918—just one day before the armistice.[59] This act placed Romania on the winning side of the conflict and, with the subsequent dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, opened the door for the unification of all Romanian historical regions. A failed campaign and a disastrous treaty were ultimately rendered irrelevant by a broader geopolitical collapse, allowing Romania to finally achieve its long-sought national objectives.

10. Conclusion: The Formation of a Nation-State

The history of Romania from the medieval period to the Great War is a narrative of persistent struggle, profound transformation, and the gradual convergence of disparate histories. The journey began in the 14th century with the late emergence of the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia from a decentralized and volatile frontier. Their existence was defined by a delicate and often violent balancing act, preserving their autonomy through a "survival through submission" strategy against the Ottoman Empire. The reigns of legendary princes like Vlad the Impaler and Stephen the Great, while celebrated in national memory, underscore the brutal realities of this struggle, revealing a history shaped as much by military prowess as by the fluid nature of political alliances and the power of contemporary propaganda.

The distinct path of Transylvania, long integrated into the Hungarian Kingdom, highlights the fractured nature of the Romanian people's history. The political exclusion of the Romanian majority, institutionalized by the *Unio Trium Nationum*, led to a unique form of national awakening. The Habsburg takeover and the formation of the Uniate Church, while foreign-imposed, inadvertently created an intellectual elite that, through the "Transylvanian School," provided the ideological bedrock for a unified nation-state.

The 19th century became the crucible of Romanian modernity. The Phanariote era, despite its economic exploitation, paradoxically introduced the modern administrative and cultural ideas that fueled the very nationalist sentiment that would ultimately overthrow it. The revolutions of 1848, though suppressed, brought to the forefront the demands for liberal reform and national unity. The political masterstroke of Alexandru Ioan Cuza's dual election in 1859 finally united the two principalities, launching a period of transformative reforms that, while progressive, created a powerful central state and failed to fully resolve the deep-seated agrarian crisis.

The final act of this long historical drama was played out on the stage of World War I. Romania's high-stakes gamble to unify with Transylvania resulted in a military catastrophe and a humiliating treaty. Yet, in a testament to the role of historical contingency, the collapse of

the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 allowed Romania to achieve its national dream. The journey from decentralized, feudal principalities to a modern nation-state was not a linear progression but a complex, multi-faceted process shaped by internal social dynamics, the influence of intellectual movements, and the dramatic shifts of great power politics.

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